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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the views of three leaders in the field of higher education on various aspects of the role of leadership in today's colleges and universities. Dave Ambler of the University of Kansas notes that the traditional leadership style, which he refers to as the "plastic president," produces leaders who become combinations of all-knowing entities and salespersons, and who define for the institution and its personnel the objectives and priorities to be followed. Don Adams of Drake university believes that many current leaders in higher education are faced with a leadership challenge, directing institutions with old ideas, with little vision and planning beyond the next academic year, without an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their institutions, and without creating opportunities for institutional growth. Joan Claar of Cornell College maintains that there is a crisis in higher education leadership, and that some leaders do not possess the skills needed to cope with rising institutional debt, rising tuition, degree devaluation, and the deteriorating image of higher education. (Contains 11 references.) (MDM)

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The Leadership Conundrum: Leadership Development Perspectives in Higher Education

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Abstract

The leadership conundrum looms larger than ever as higher education enters the 21st century. There is a real challenge to create leadership skills and programming that emphasizes areas such as institutional collaboration, common values, vision building, and obtaining an institutional culture of leadership. Three prominent leaders in the field of higher education speak about the issue of leadership. Their perspectives range from the problems affiliated with a lack of leadership to the future skills and programming that will be needed to be an effective leader.

The Leadership Conundrum: Leadership Development Perspectives in Higher Education

When employing the term "leadership," some of us in higher education often use it as a panacea for our institutional woes. At times, we believe that applying this remedy to languishing institutional programs and strategies will somehow bring a prosperous tomorrow. However, doubts persist concerning this perspective of leadership. To be sure, we continually discuss the issue of leadership and its place in the academy. As we approach the 21st century, academicians and practitioners in higher education are beginning to define this ubiquitous term more from a perspective of leadership development (e.g., programming or skills or strategies that will effectively address issues that challenge higher education).

Traditional Leadership Perspectives

Ralph Waldo Emerson summed up the meaning of leadership quite succinctly when he noted that, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" (Gardner, 1988, p. 9). Traditionally, the leadership direction at many higher education institutions has come from one individual who has maintained a strict control over the institution and shared few leadership responsibilities. This type of leadership is viewed as a top-down hierarchical approach that reduces leadership to formulas and prescriptions (Drucker, 1974; Urwick & Brech, 1966).

For years, institutions of higher education have embraced this Emersonian style of leadership. Because of this unilateral approach, many colleges and universities have been unprepared to develop innovative and necessary leadership programs that address salient issues, such as meeting the needs of a changing student population, which confront higher education as it enters the 21st century. As Lewis (1994) points out, "We should be placing less emphasis on the leadership of one or a few individuals and instead be thinking of how to create a culture of

leadership that will empower all members of the institution" (p. 5).

Leadership Issues

Presently, higher education is in an era of great change and restructure. For example, many institutions are required to operate with less financial resources or establish institutional accountability with various stakeholders such as students, government, alumni, and faculty. Within this context, there is a need to develop leadership programming that emphasizes the human variable over formulas, and the inclusion of many institutional personnel instead of a select few. As Owens (1995) states, "In education today, recognition is rapidly growing that leadership cannot be reduced to formulas and prescriptions, but must be attuned to human variables..." (p. 121).

Current literature in higher education indicates that leadership has a major impact on an institution's vitality or demise. There is a real challenge in higher education to create programs that accentuate operationalizing leadership concepts and models such as institutional collaboration, common values, vision building, service learning, emotional intelligence, and obtaining an institutional culture of leadership (Berquist, 1992; Goleman, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 1995). However, higher education has been slow in changing its traditional leadership practices and models. Because of this, the leadership conundrum looms larger than ever as higher education enters the 21st century.

Leadership Development Perspectives

Annually, Iowa State University holds a Student Affairs Institute. Participants and speakers discuss various issues affecting higher education. A recent topic of discussion between academicians, administrators, practitioners, and students concerned the timeless issue of

leadership. The Institute invited three prominent leaders in the field of higher education, Dr. Dave Ambler, Dr. Don Adams, and Dr. Joan Claar, to speak about the issue of leadership. Their perspectives ranged from the problems affiliated with a lack of leadership to the future skills and programming that will be needed to be an effective leader.

A. The Plastic President

Dr. Dave Ambler of the University of Kansas noted that a traditional leadership style, which he referred to as the "plastic president," continues to be prevalent today in higher education and is detrimental to the vitality of an institution. For instance, colleges and universities that are led by plastic presidents often become institutions that are lethargic, without policy, lacking in vision, containing students who have become passive participants in the educational process, and places where educational purpose has been replaced by consumerism. This style of leadership does not allow leaders to take on challenges or aid in student success.

Furthermore, there is a prevailing notion in higher education that leadership consists of manifesting an institutional vision and aligning personnel with that vision. This concept of vision assumes that the leader of a college or university, usually the president, defines the objectives and priorities of the institution and personnel will follow. In this concept, leadership is reduced to a combination of an all-knowing entity and salesmanship. To avoid this traditional notion of vision and leadership, higher education should be striving toward shared, institutional visions. When there is effective leadership present, (i.e., one that is concerned with student success, has policy, takes on challenges, and sees education as a liberating source), there can be a shared vision between administrators, faculty, and staff (Ambler, 1997).

B. The Leadership Challenge

Dr. Don Adams of Drake University believes that many current leaders in higher education are faced with what he referred to as "the leadership challenge." As higher education enters the 21st century, there are numerous challenges that institutions are encountering such as planning, institutional accountability, a changing student population, and emerging technology. However, many leaders continue to direct an institution with old ideas, with little vision and planning beyond the next academic year, without an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of an institution, and without creating many opportunities for institutional growth. This style of leadership is not conducive to meeting the challenges that await higher education.

Moreover, the two major challenges confronting higher education leadership are a lack of institutional collaboration and the integral role that values play in creating and maintaining effective leadership. As higher education enters the 21st century, it faces a major challenge: the lack of collaboration between faculty, staff, and administrators. This lack of institutional collaboration often causes colleges and universities to become engaged in poor planning and poor organization of personnel.

Along with the challenge of institutional collaboration, many colleges and universities are confronting the issue of misguided values. This leadership issue has caused institutions to take on self-destructive behaviors. Because of this, leadership in education needs to consistently challenge its own assumptions and values (Adams, 1997).

C. Current Crisis

Dr. Joan Claar of Cornell College noted that there is a current crisis in higher education leadership. Presently, higher education is in its most difficult period since WW II due to institutional debt, rising tuition, degree devaluation, the deteriorating image of higher education,

and budget decreases. Some leaders within higher education do not possess the skills needed to cope with these difficult issues. With this reality, higher education leadership in the 21st century will have to respond to these challenges with new skills and a renewed culture of leadership that involves more personnel in leadership development programs (Claar, 1997).

D. Future Skills and Development Strategies

The speakers noted some of the future skills and program development that will be necessary for effective higher education leadership in the 21st century:

- Taking on tough challenges such as access to higher education, program funding, and mediation issues.
- Focusing on student success in both academic and non-academic areas.
- Directing institutions based on actual policies derived from collaborative efforts between faculty, staff, and administrators.
- Developing groups that will enhance teamwork in dealing with institutional issues.
- Implementing institution-wide training and learning programs for faculty, staff, administrators, and students to raise campus consciousness about the issue of leadership.
- Training leaders to be generalists who connect with individuals and groups at various levels.
- Encouraging leaders to apply leadership development models.

Conclusion

The leadership conundrum may always be an issue of debate. However, one perspective of the leadership question is clear. There is a need for effective leadership development that assists faculty, staff, and administrators in obtaining the necessary skills and strategies to address issues that challenge higher education as it enters the 21st century. As Lewis (1994) reminds us,

"Leadership development programming can significantly strengthen the institution by fostering a team approach to solving institutional problems, by increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of its human resources, and by creating a ready pool of qualified professionals..." (p. 5).

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